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AUTHOR Wenger, Paul
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ABSTRACT

Placement services and employee recruiting for college graduates have become major enterprises. Organized employment assistance consists of (1) college placement services, (2) personnel departments within businesses, (3) traditional employment agencies paid by employers, and (4) agencies paid by the client for individual job searches. Although they may share information, each facilitates the process of finding employment for different reasons and in different ways. Certain formal behaviors have become almost universal norms for college graduate applicants, including preparation and presentation of a resume, arranging and attending personal interviewers, and agreement on reasonably specific terms of employment when job offers are made and accepted. Other less formalized expectations are for behaviors that communicate mutually held values. Some communication strategies are difficult to separate clearly from others that characterize the varied kinds of employment assistance, but the differences among the forms of assistance used by college and university graduates are apparent. Few graduates are aware of what those differences are, and only limited, realistic information is available from job-hunting literature. Graduates seeking jobs need to shape "individual" strategies for obtaining employment, consider carefully the mechanisms for implementation, and learn more about both the ranges of those providing employment service and what they have to offer. (HTH)

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE FOR COLLEGE GRADUATES

Paul Wenger

Central Connecticut State University

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Introduction

In the early 1960s, I began a college teaching career armed only with a newly minted master's degree and a friendly job tip from a graduate professor. Following the lead provided, I found myself being interviewed by a university administrator and was hired on the spot. Today that memory seems idyllic in contrast to the complex job market facing new graduates with bachelors and masters degrees. Then, such easy employment stories were common; now they are rare. Nowadays, according to William Yeomans, "thousands of young people struggle to find work simply because they don't know what they want to do or how to track down jobs"(Jobs '82-'83). The Introduction to Job Forecasts, a compendium of current openings, suggests that "no matter how good their education, most graduates are ill prepared to match their skills with companies that need them . . . . Graduates deserve help in matching their expertise and interests with employers."(1985, p. i). Partly as a result, the employment assistance industry has mushroomed both in size and specialization. A survey of recent University of Houston graduates found that campus recruiting and employment agencies were two of the five most common job search strategies (Jackson ED 247491). Placement services and employee recruiting have become major enterprises, a part of our society's increasing reliance on personal services and service industries.

My purpose in this paper is to explore some of the communication strategies that have accompanied the explosion of employment search services for college and university graduates. I will examine the institutional objectives and the approaches to defining employability proffered by college/university placement offices and independent agencies funded either by employers or applicants for employment as well as some features of corporate personnel divisions. My intention is to identify some differences in objectives and techniques used by each type of employment assistance and suggest practical implications for job seekers and other interested parties.

Excluded from detailed consideration are state operated assistance programs for the unemployed and the job listing services of professional associations. The former rarely are available or useful to new graduates from higher education. While the latter are more accessible, their function generally is akin to newspaper classified advertising, thus less a personal service than an impersonal bulletin board (Career-Related Services, ED 214809). One additional limitation for this study will be a primary focus on graduates from non-career specific, educational programs such as those in the humanities and most of the other liberal arts. My descriptions may have wider relevance, but probably are least applicable to graduates of job-specific areas such as nursing or accounting (Yeomans, p. 10. Also see Careers, p. ix).

Preliminary Perspectives

All groups who offer employment assistance do so for some particular self interest. Even our fond memories of disinterested and friendly pointers and tips should not obscure the varied motivations of those who gave such advice. Reasons for such advice often are not the same as the thoughts we had ourselves or the ideas of prospective employers. The three differing viewpoints (the applicant's, the middleman's, and the employer's) should be distinguished from each other so as to lay the groundwork for a more detailed classification of employment assistance agencies.

(1) From the applicant's or seeker's point of view, the search process should be straightforward and the outcome satisfying. The new college graduate anticipates that completing a degree will assist employment success. Candidates generally believe their school work and any employment history demonstrate qualities such as dependability and proficiency. While a job applicant may or may not have self confidence, the desire to display readiness for new challenges is almost universal, and the wish for maximum compensation is as well.

Beyond any facade of personal assurance, however, very little seems certain to most prospective employees. Potential employer qualities, actual work duties, and work environment largely are unknown except superficially through advertisements and other limited sources. Uncertainties also encompass dress, manner, timing, competencies, and a variety of other hidden or obscured expectations. Many job applicants hope for benevolent acceptance but anticipate uncaring rejection. All make judgments about likely adaptations to the prospective employer's needs and believe themeselves ultimately acceptable. Understandably, a "knowledgeable" advisor or facilitator is very attractive as a buffer against fears of failure or rejection and to help clear application hurdles.

(2) At least for their applicant clients, employment agents all try to maintain a kind of middle role with openness toward both job hunters and those who offer positions. Employment agencies, personnel recruiters, professional resume writers and their ilk have little difficulty gaining clients. These middle ground "agents" present themselves to would-be employees as leading the way toward employment success. Most individual contacts are relatively short term, though some agencies do provide contracted services to either particular companies or individual job seekers.

The prevalent ways of compensating employment agencies is a fee paid by the employer for candidates selected, payment by the job hunters, or some combination of these. The most most frequent arrangement is with potential employers. This makes the recruiter an agent of the employer who can set the terms for

appropriate deference and desired results (Yeomans, ,p. 71). Since this relationship is more continuous than any with job applicants, both parties tend to accommodate each other. Almost all employment/recruiting agencies see themselves as selective, turning away some applicants and carefully screening others to successfully match requirements of employers. When employer needs are nebulous or not expressed correctly, the agent's task is more difficult and the risk of being ignored increases. In the end, assessing the fit between employer and applicant depends on the consent of the two parties. Employment agents thus become more consciously manipulative than most of their clients.

(3) The employer's perspective generally is more experienced and less trusting than that of most newly degreed graduates. Requiring a college degree itself is often a screening device, though candidates lacking career-specific preparation are given little special favor on account of academic accomplishments. Employers want to hire capable persons for positions that sometimes are specific but often are rather vaguely defined and occasionally only potentially available. Vacancy listings may or may not be genuinely descriptive (Ginn, 1981, p. 24), applications can receive careful attention or not, and applicants-in-general often are never told the outcome. Employers typically expect a sizeable number of candidates to appear (Munschauer, 1984, p. 20) for entry level positions but control the length and rigor of the application and review processes. Uncertainty about the quality of candidates is common, but scarcely any employer admits to doubts about his or her capacity to rank order or otherwise determine the acceptability of applicants.

The Organized Forms of Employment Assistance

Professional assistance for job seekers comes from social workers, lawyers, teachers, and virtually every other group whose members work with individuals. However, organizations that focus mainly or entirely on prospective employer-employee contacts are clearly distinguishable from groups or persons who provide employment advice incidentally. Organized employment assistance, particularly for new college graduates, consists essentially of (1) placement services by colleges and universities, (2) personnel departments of larger organizations, (3) traditional "employment agencies" who are paid by employers for recruiting services, and (4) agencies who receive payment from clients in exchange for assisting their individual job searches.

(1) Most familiar to many college students is the campus placement service or career development division. School placement services have existed in higher education for a number of decades. A considerable expansion of service has occurred since the early seventies. Each placement (sometimes called "career development") office is an adjunct to school programs (Cappeto, 1981). Typical services include maintenance of

credential materials for students and graduates who prepare the necessary paperwork, listings of openings provided to the school by prospective employers, provision of a range of self-help materials, arrangement of space on campus for employers who wish to interview students, and several ancillary activities.

Placement services are of recognizable benefit to many current students as well as graduates of particular institutions. Encouragement to begin the job search process early and systematically, assistance with resumes, practice interviews, and arrangements for on-campus pre-employment interviews are typical offerings. Almost all placement offices report numerous job acquisitions by graduates, but the outcomes of specific services are difficult to ascertain. One university placement director suggests that "relatively few graduates obtain job offers through on-campus recruiting" (Eckberg, 1984, p. 20). Since college placement services operate as part of particular institutions, their main objective must be to coordinate with the school's programs rather than represent individual students or graduates (Ginn, 1981, p. 127).

(2) Personnel department of large organizations provide employment advice and opportunities closest to the actual hiring decisionmakers. Major corporations and many other organizations systematically seek candidates for new employment and include college campuses as a recruiting location. In addition, new graduates approach personnel departments in large numbers, often without much or any relevant experience. They rarely are considered for other than entry level professional positions(Yeomans, pp. 9-10). Far more resumes and inquiries generally are received by personnel departments than can be considered in detail, but the oversupply is intentional (Acuff, 1982) and encouraged through advertisements of general openings such as for management trainees, sales assistants, or administrative assistants. Of course, well organized personnel departments adjust search efforts to match the specific needs of their organizations.

(3) Employment agencies who work independently on behalf of employers mirror many of the traits just described. Their livelihood, however, depends on a <u>continuous</u> stream of qualified persons who want new employment. Hence, they spend more time collecting detailed information from applicants through lengthy questionnaires and more frequent interviews. Many new graduates appreciate this level of interest, especially after having been rebuffed elsewhere. The information permits more specific screening of applicants for multiple positions (Esposito, 1983). Companies often communicate unwritten preferences to agencies that may include age, marital history, or race that would be illegal discrimination if specified directly to applicants. Employment agents then provide employers with a refined sample of applicants who in turn have much better prospects of actually being employed but not necessarily satisfied with the positions

accepted. A University of Texas at Austin study of recent graduates found significantly less satisfaction with employment agency placements than with jobs found through personal contacts (Becker, ED 200104).

(4) A final kind of employment agent works directly for selected job seekers and often eschews direct, separate contacts with employers (Hoffman and Dolan, 1984). Unlike employer supported agencies, the agency that focuses only on those searching for employment generally requires payment (often ranging as high as $2500-5000) in advance, provides voluminous "informational" material, professionally prepares multiple resumes for each client, requires the client to undergo detailed "coaching," and makes independently obtained lists of job "openings" available. Detailed information is collected from and about clients, but the use of the information explicitly is more discreet and subject to the client's consent in each instance (Ward, 1984). While some of these agents appear to "guarantee" employment for clients, from five to fifteen percent or more of persons accepted by these agencies do not obtain desired employment, and refunds are rarely if ever given.

Shared Communication Strategies

Certain formal behaviors have become almost universal norms for college and university graduates who apply for jobs. These include preparation and presentation of a resume of qualifications, arranging and carrying out a personal interview on the potential employer's terms, and agreement on reasonably specific terms of employment when job offers are made and accepted. Other less formalized expectations are for behaviors that communicate mutually held values. Some of these are that applicants wish and attempt to make a good impression and that employers will overtly compare applicants to each other in reaching employment decisions. A final informal expectation is that placement/recruiting agents will not intrude into the direct contacts between employers and applicants.

Communication expectations that generally are part of patterns described above include (1) written materials among the parties but especially from the applicant to employment agent and prospective employers, (2) a similar greater need for the applicant to appear comfortable and articulate when asking and answering questions, and (3) an avoidance of irrevocable commitments until satisfactory terms are agreed to. These behaviors and strategies are followed by all the parties throughout the job search and employment process.

Differentiated Communication Strategies

Four different kinds of employment assistance commonly are available for college and university graduates. Each is aware of the others, and in some instances they will share information or

certain services. All four claim to facilitate the process of finding employment, but they do so for different reasons and in different ways.

(1) A school placement office usually has one to four employees, even for comparatively large institutions. Since the main interest is in popular programs offered by the school, specific information mostly focuses on related careers. Despite the title, a placement office rarely "places" graduates in actual positions but emphasizes a facilitation strategy instead. Making prospective graduates aware of their own responsibilities becomes a major point, while former graduates sometimes return to the placement service for job listings and credential documentation. To sum up, the strategies of a Placement Service are to emphasize positions related to the school's programs, to demonstrate the school's willingness to assist graduates, and to leave most responsibility for actual jobhunting to the persons using the service. The example of Graduate A is typical.

Graduate A visited his school's Placement Service in the last semester of his senior year. He was given a brochure on writing resumes, another on tips for jobhunting, was instructed to complete and return the credential documents also provided, and to request several persons to write personal references. After completing final examinations and enjoying graduation activities, Graduate A did meet the Placement Service requirements and soon began receiving the lists of possible positions. For any that seemed attractive, he made a contact himself, and when requested the Placement Service forwarded his credentials.

(2) Strategies used by corporate, personnel departments probably are more sophisticated than those of placement offices, partly because most have larger staffs and more resources to use. Certainly they have less reason to "help" individual graduates, though most have policies and procedures designed to avoid negative reactions toward the company from disappointed applicants. Nevertheless, the objective is to select a few who meet written and unwritten criteria for specific employment, usually at the entry level for graduates. As the following example illustrates, the interests of company and college graduate often diverge.

Graduate B chose to prepare her own resume with the assistance of friends, sent it to dozens of companies selected from classified advertisements, and after receiving no replies other than some form letter rejections began to phone and visit some places that had not responded. Several personal visits resulted in being asked to complete a standard, company application form. After several discouraging weeks, Graduate B was asked to come to an interview. She went with high hopes but did not hear anything afterward until she called to learn that she had not been selected. This experience happened a second time, but on the third time around, Graduate A received an offer of entry level

work and accepted gratefully despite a rather low rate of compensation.

Personnel divisions tend to be more impersonal than school placement services. Anticipating many applicants, a personnel agent or department uses categorical screens such as degree completion, gender, or years of work experience to eliminate a high proportion. The ubiquitous application form often is the means for sorting out the few who actually are interviewed. Another personnel department strategy is to seek predetermined qualities of demeanor and background that meet unwritten requirements. For instance, graduates of certain schools can be given preference as might candidates who are physically attractive. Unsuccessful applicants rarely are given any reason for rejection, and many simply are never contacted again.

(3) Employment agencies that service employers also depend on a high volume of applicants. But since each job seeker can be considered for a variety of positions, the agency collects much more information than an individual company is likely to request. This practice is recommended by the National Association of Personnel Consultants which includes more than 2400 private employment agencies in this country (undated brochure). This strategy of insisting on virtual life histories from applicants is accompanied by measures to avoid the strictures of right-to-know or right to privacy statutes. Data is collated from multiple sources and provided freely to prospective employers. The result, as the following example shows, can be an applicant unaware of what potential employers already know when an interview is scheduled.

Graduate C turned to an employment agency after several attempts to secure employment on his own. To his relief, he learned immediately that agency services would cost nothing as any fee would be paid by the employer. Therefore, he readily answered the myriad of questions about his personal life, financial and work history, and other subjects, though some items seemed unnecessarily intrusive. He also signed a release authorizing the agent on his behalf to seek information from past employers and to give whatever would be needed to prospective employers. In the following weeks, he kept in regular contact with the agency as instructed. When finally sent on an interview, he was "successful" and received a job offer but at a wage he had told the employment agency was the absolute minimum acceptable. He vaguely wondered whether he had been manipulated but accepted the offer because nothing else was available.

The strategies of employment agencies who work for employers are not difficult to discern. For prospective applicants an image of availability and success is cultivated. Job seekers who become clients are probed from several directions both to match the wishes of employers and to weed out those who fail to fit a conventional profile. Recent college graduates may be especially

pliable for obtaining information and accepting direction without question. The agent ostensibly fulfills a nonpartisan role but in reality seeks to carry out an employer's directives while minimizing restrictions that would exist otherwise.

(4) Employment services that restrict themselves to would-be employees and require payment from them are the last of those to be discussed. While some of these providers do little more than write or rewrite resumes, the best known and usually the most expensive ones create full scale marketing campaigns for their clients. Usually aimed at mid to upper income positions and thus limited in access for new college graduates, the prospect of lucrative employment sometimes seems to justify the expense, as in the example that follows.

Graduate D turned to the Clients' Agency after a lack of success on her own and because the agency's advertisement promised mid-level job offers for graduates with previous work experience such as hers. The first interview was arranged immediately after her self-prepared resume arrived, and the event was different from any she had experienced before. The interviewer asked about her objectives and motivation, emphasized the agency's selectivity, dismissed her resume preparation as uninformed and trite, noted a few promising elements, told some agency success stories, and invited her to return the following day for an agency presentation. At this second meeting, she was given a full and positive description of the service to follow and offered the service package for one-third or $1500 down at once and the remainder within ten days. Graduate D was staggered but impressed, and drawing on remaining family resources, accepted. She was assigned to a two day training program, some followup conferences, and a detailed schedule for herself using agency materials and advice. Seeking a position became a full time occupation with all plans mapped in advance and careful records maintained of all connections with possible employers, personal references, and a contrived network of contacts. The process took time but with plenty to do and a toll free number for advice, Graduate D found her totally rewritten resume (in three versions for different job objectives) being taken seriously and even complimented. Interviews still came slowly, but she was a finalist after every one and finally accepted an offer of a comfortable salary and generous benefits.

The strategies clearly are different from other kinds of employment assistance. The personalization is continous, and though the agent remains behind the scenes, the "professional" imprint on the candidate's activity is both prized and marketable. Only persons deemed likely to succeed are accepted, and the intent is to guide and direct them thoroughly in a particular pattern of behavior. Much of the time, the effort succeeds, but the cost is high and failures are given short shrift, since only client success fits the strategic image here.

Practical Implications

Communication strategies often are difficult to separate clearly from others that characterize the varied kinds of employment assistance. Nevertheless, the striking differences among the forms of assistance used by college and university graduates is apparent from the contrasting descriptions. Few graduates have more than a vague inkling of what those differences are, and only limited, realistic information is available from jobhunting literature.

For those seeking jobs with a new college degree, one obvious implication is the need to shape individual strategies for obtaining employment and consider carefully the mechanisms for implementation. When seeking assistance from employment counselors or agents, more should be known about both the range of those providing such help and what they have to offer. Finally, all of us with an interest in practical employment opportunities should look for research and begin to do more ourselves on employment assistance processes and those who carry them out.

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